PITTA

Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
New Series Volume 18 Number 4 April 2021

DECCAN BIRDERS EVENTS

In light of the Corona virus (COVID-19) epidemic and relevant guidelines that have been issued, all Deccan Birders Field Trips and Indoor Meetings are on hold until further notice. Details of upcoming activities will be communicated once the situation improves.

HOOTING FOR THE OWLS

Text and Photos: Prachi Mehta, Ph.D.

Forest Owlet

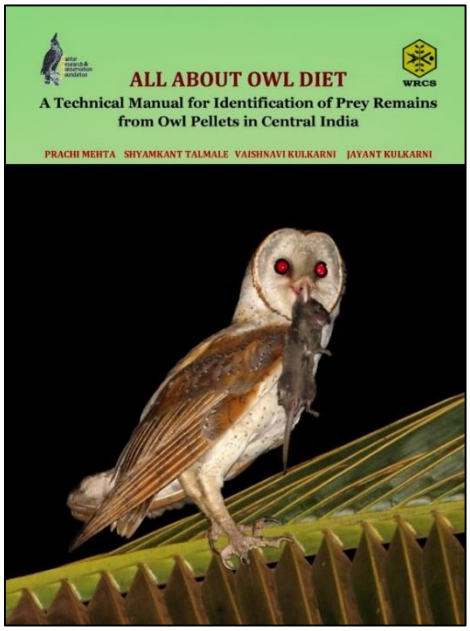
The Guardians of the Night

Owls are apex carnivorous birds who feed on live prey, just like eagles and kites. But unlike other birds, owls are highly specialized birds of prey. To avoid competition with other birds of prey, owls have adopted the night life. Most owls are nocturnal but a few like the Forest Owlet are diurnal, that is, they are active during the day.

There are some every unique aspects about owls. Owls can rotate their heads up to 210 degrees so that they know what is going on behind their back. The flight feathers of owls are unique too – they are arranged in such a way that they can fly completely silently in the night and swoop down to catch the unsuspecting prey by surprise. In fact, owls are more often heard than seen. However, unlike other birds, owl songs are far from being melodious – in fact they are eerie and spooky. At night in a forest area, if you hear a medley of deep sounds reminding you of a softly uttered questioning *"wut? wut? wut?"*, rapacious laughter *"whoohaha… whoohaha… whoohaha"*, something that sounded like the scream of a strangled woman, a deep resonating *"Ghughu… ghughu… ghughu…"* or a high pitched screech – then you should know that you have owls for company.

Brown Fish Owl inside tree cavity

Most birds build nests… here again, owls are an exception. They stay in tree cavities, hollows, ravines, cliffs and even in abandoned quarries and houses. Not exactly pleasant places to be at night, but owls prefer them. Their diet is enriched by rats, shrews, lizards, snakes, fish, frogs, smaller birds, scorpions and insects. Owls gulp down their prey intact without bothering to tease it apart. The indigestible parts such as skulls and dentitions of mammals, beaks and feet of birds, scorpion stings, and insect heads and bodies are then regurgitated out of the mouth in the form of pellets. Owl pellets are a treasure trove full of colourful prey remains. Analyzing the pellet of owls is akin to forensic science where the evidence of remains provide a clue about what was eaten by the owl.


ALL ABOUT OWL DIET
A Technical Manual for Identification of Prey Remains from Owl Pellets in Central India
PRACHI MEHTA SHYAMKANT TALMALE VAISHNAVI KULKARNI JAYANT KULKARNI
WRCS

A WRCS publication on identification of prey remains from owl pellets

The magnificence of owls is misinterpreted in many cultures across the world, including India. There are many negative effects of this. Though owls show their wisdom by selecting a nocturnal niche to avoid competition with other birds, they are considered to be stupid and foolish (*ullu*) for some bizarre reasons. Owls are considered to be inauspicious and messengers of death just because they fly at night! They are considered evil because of their unconventional appearance. Owls are like the proverbial Golden Goose for the Sorcery business. They are kept as pets in cages where their powerful wings and talons are severed so they can't fly, their eyes are injected with coloured dye to make them appear formidable and finally, they are made to perform on the diktats of the owner as an evil and malicious power.

Owls are killed for their powerful eyes, talons, beaks, tails, and feathers for use in fake traditional medicines that purportedly help the consumer develop the prowess of owls. If owls really possessed such super powers, they would not get caught and killed so easily! Eggs and chicks of owls are stolen from the nests for gambling and earning a quick buck. Every year during the Deepavali festival, owls are captured in large numbers for trade and for gambling.

For those who want to learn further on owl trade in India, I suggest reading "*Imperiled Custodians of the Night",* an eye-opening report by WWF and TRAFFIC India. This report was published a decade ago – unfortunately, nothing has changed much since then.

Owls provide an immensely important ecological service by feeding on rodents. A single owl can feed on 1000 mice in one year, which would otherwise damage 1/3rd of the grain in a crop field. In some parts of the country, enlightened farmers install a pole in their field for the owls to perch and hunt out the rodents. The owl is considered to be the vehicle of Goddess Lakshmi, and some farmers believe that worshipping owls will bring wealth in their lives. But in most other places, owls are not so lucky.

Owls help to maintain the balance of ecosystem by occupying a nocturnal niche so that diurnal predators can live. Owls exploit the nocturnal prey at night which otherwise would have proliferated and could have caused a lot of damage to the ecosystem. Owls keep the populations of destructive rodents under natural control and thus provide the farmers with a prosperous harvest. Imagine, if the rodents were not controlled, how much damage would they cause to grain crops – where would we get our next meal from?

Indian Eagle Owl

There are over 230 species of owls in the world, of which 34 species are found within India. However, in India, owls still have a long way to go before they make it to the official priority list of species that need protection efforts. One may wonder why owls need any protection – it seems like they are all over and doing fine. Well, this is not entirely true. To understand further let us discuss the case of one species – the small but powerful Forest Owlet.

The enigmatic Forest Owlet

The Forest Owlet (*Athene (Heteroglaux) blewitti*) is a curious bird, both by name and nature. It has captured the imagination of many within and outside the country, and for the right reasons.

The Forest Owlet has an interesting past associated with it. Let us travel back in time to the 19th century. It was in 1872 when an Irish officer, Francis Robert Blewitt (FR Blewitt) saw this different-looking owl near Phooljhar in eastern Madhya Pradesh (now in Chhattisgarh). Perplexed by its somewhat confusing appearance, he sent the specimen to AO Hume, a well-known British taxonomist and a civil service officer serving in India. Hume immediately recognized this owl as a species new to science, and named it after Blewitt. Recent literature mentions that the bird was originally collected by William Blewitt, who was FR Blewitt's younger brother. Apparently, William Blewitt was a Customs officer in Punjab, so he decided to use the pseudonym of his elder brother – to avoid his boss's wrath for spending time away from his office in Punjab, for collecting birds in Central India! However, for us it is still Blewitt's Owl.

The Forest Owlet is endemic to India, that is, it is not found anywhere outside India. This small-sized owlet has been placed among the top seventeen birds in the world that are in endangered category. The International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN) had declared it as a Critically Endangered species owing to its isolated and perhaps declining population. The Forest Owlet is placed in Schedule I of Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1974, indicating it as a species of priority conservation concern. Recently it has been downlisted to the Endangered category, as the records of its occurrence are appearing from a few more locations.

A Ghost from the Past

The story of the Forest Owlet's apparent extinction and rediscovery is equally dramatic. Between 1872 and 1884, six Forest Owlet specimens were collected from the country; the first one in 1872 by Blewitt as mentioned earlier, the second one in 1877 by Valentine Ball from Orissa, and four more during 1880-1883 by James Davidson from Central Maharashtra. After 1884, there were many reports of Forest Owlet sightings all over the country, but all of them were cases of the Spotted Owlet being mistaken for the Forest Owlet. In 1961, Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen reported having collected a Forest Owlet way back in 1914 from Mandvi in Gujarat, thus extending its range further west. Once again an intensive search was carried out for the Forest Owlet all over the country, but it drew a blank. Finally, in 1972, Dr SD Ripley considered the possibility that the Forest Owlet may have become extinct. So the Blewitt's Owl became known as a possibly extinct species in India!

Given this background, one can imagine the surprise and excitement that was generated by the news of its rediscovery in 1997. Dr Pamela Rasmussen, the American ornithologist, was studying some preserved skins of Forest Owlet. She realized that the bird looked very different from those shown in the illustrations in Indian bird books, and Indian scientists were looking for it based on a wrong picture of its appearance. Her museum research also found that the record of Forest Owlet from Gujarat was a false one, as Col Meinertzhagen had stolen one specimen from Davidson's collection and claimed it as his own! So much fuss and fraud over an owl!

So Dr Rasmussen decided to carry out a survey for sightings of the bird at its historical locations In India. They started with a search in Odisha and Chhattisgarh, where the erstwhile forests had disappeared giving way to crop fields, and they could not locate any Forest Owlet there. In November 1997, they started a survey in Maharashtra near Nandurbar district and, much to everyone's surprise, they found two Forest Owlets. Thus the Forest Owlet made its reappearance after 113 long years! The bird was not extinct – it was overlooked by so many people for so many years. The rediscovery renewed the interest of scientists and naturalists in the Forest Owlet in India.

Present Status of the Forest Owlet in India

After its rediscovery, several organizations carried out surveys to determine the distribution of the Forest Owlet. The Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) initiated the surveys in 1999 and reported the presence of the Forest Owlet from North-western Maharashtra and Melghat Tiger Reserve. Our organization, the Wildlife Research and Conservation Society (WRCS) also carried out a survey of the Forest Owlet in five central Indian states – Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat – where they were originally known to be present. Our surveys were successful in locating the Forest Owlet from Khandwa and Betul district in Madhya Pradesh, and a few more locations in Northern Maharashtra. At present the Forest Owlet is known from three states in India – Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. It appears as though the Forest Owlet is existing in small and isolated fragments along teak dominant forests.

Training of field staff

Colour-banded Forest Owlet

Jungle Owlet

From 2012 onwards, we have been carrying out an ecological assessment of the Forest Owlet in the Central Indian landscape. Our study is trying to understand the possible reasons for localized distribution of the Forest Owlet in Central India, its small population, and why it has not been able to colonize as successfully as other similar-sized owls such as the Spotted Owlet, the Jungle Owlet and the Scops Owls, although they are often found sharing the same habitat and using the same resources for feeding and nesting. The mystique of the life of the Forest Owlet remains to be unraveled.

Meanwhile, the study has provided valuable insights into strategies that owls have adapted for survival, and how thoughtlessly we humans destroy them out of personal insecurities and irrational beliefs.

Indian Scops Owl

Spotted Owlet

The genus of the Forest Owlet was another issue of recent contention. At the time of its discovery in 1872, Hume established the genus *Heteroglaux* for the Forest Owlet based on its distinct morphology. Although the Forest Owlet possesses superficial similarity to the much more commonly seen Spotted Owlet (*Athene brama*), it has several distinctive features that distinguish it from the Spotted Owlet.

The Forest Owlet has an unspotted crown, a full throat collar and thickly feathered legs; its habits of lateral tail-flicking and undulating flight are some of the most visible characteristics that made the taxonomists create a unique genus, *Heteroglaux*, for a single species!

A recent phylogeny study by SACON in collaboration with our organization WRCS has finally settled the long-standing dispute on the taxonomy of the Forest Owlet as belonging to *Athene* genus. A serious case of identity crisis has been averted.

For the last one decade we have been studying the Forest Owlet in the Central Indian landscape, and we have just seen the tip of the iceberg. Our study involves examining the factors that may be impacting its distribution, site occupancy, foraging, nesting, and ultimately its breeding success. We have been using time-tested methods of color-banding and radio-telemetry, which provide robust scientific data to gain further insights into the ecology of the species. We work in close collaboration with the Maharashtra Forest Department and Madhya Pradesh Forest Department, who have been very supportive of the research. Local communities are our main conservation partners in this project. By integrating good science, supportive Forest Departments and community conservation initiatives, the situation is beginning to look up for the owls.

Some instances of community conservation initiatives involving Korku tribal folk from Melghat: Women making owl tote bags (L), Men being trained on bamboo craft work (C), Hand-painted keychain made by the tribals (R)

Owls are super-evolved birds with a strong will to survive. Owls don't hoot to spook. They are incapable of casting an evil spell or predicting lucky numbers.

If at all, owls are the true guardians of the night and the onus is on us to let them fly fearlessly in the sky.

A wise old owl sat on an oak,
The more he saw the less he spoke,
The less he spoke the more he heard…
Why can't we all be like that wise old bird?

This proverbial rhyme, though meant for children, offers some much-needed wisdom to us all.

Editor's Note: Dr Prachi Mehta is Senior Scientist and Executive Director – Research with the Wildlife Research and Conservation Society (www.wrcsindia.org). She had also been the speaker at one of our Deccan Birders webinars on the Conservation of the Forest Owlet, a few months back.

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GRAND REVIVAL
Trip Report: Nehru Zoological Park, March 14, 2021

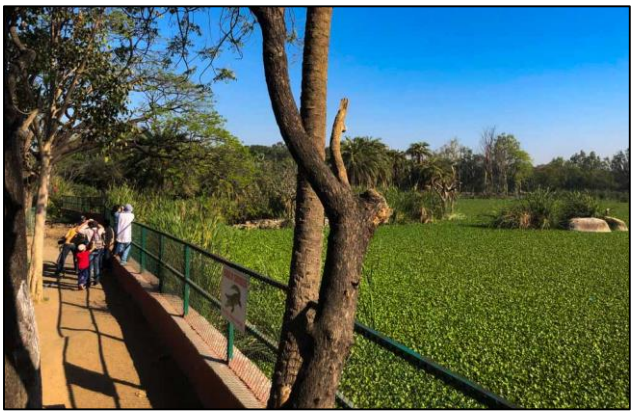
Surekha Aitabathula

The group at Nehru Zoological Park (Photos: Bharadwaj Korni)

Deccan Birders had suspended field trips since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020. After a whole year, the field trips were resumed on March 14, 2021, with a visit to the Nehru Zoological Park. It was a wonderful sight to see more than seventy birders turning up on the revival trip - it seemed as though the entire member base was longing for a birding outing since a year.

Indian Golden Oriole pair (Photo: Mohd Adnan Uddin)

Nehru Zoological Park (NZP) is a dense verdant patch that is an absolute blessing to the resident and migrant birds. The proximity to the large vegetation cover of the Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel National Police Academy and the green cover of the Agriculture University in Rajendra Nagar nearby, create conducive habitats for the birds in NZP. The USP of NZP is the several types of habitats that it offers to the birds so that the various species of birds can find their own ideal surroundings.



Some views of the surroundings
(Photos: Dr Geethanjali Ramachandra)

With scrub, grasslands and water bodies, the 380 acre site houses a large number of old trees that support tremendous bird life.

Some of the old trees in the Nehru Zoo (Photo: Bharadwaj Korni)

NZP also affords the longest bird walks. In all the NZP houses 1500 species of birds, animals and reptiles. There are neat moated enclosures for wild animals, Lion Safari, Dinosaur Park, Heronry, Nocturnal Zoo and Butterfly Park. For a nature enthusiast boredom is non-existent in NZP.

Black-headed Ibis
(Photo: Wg Cdr Yella Prakash Rao)

NZP is one of the largest Zoos in India, which was established in 1959, though access to the public was given only from 1963. The Mir Alam Tank that covers nearly 600 acres with its unique multiple Arched Bund is 200 years old is yet another attraction to the Zoo. Migratory birds are known to arrive in large numbers at the Zoo year after year.

Some young participants in action
(Photos: Siddharth Shah & Dr Geethanjali Ramachandra)

This particular trip saw several children, who showed a lot of enthusiasm for viewing the birds. This is a nascent trend which I keenly hope will catch on.

Yellow-billed Babbler
(Photo: Wg Cdr Yella Prakash Rao)

Indian Paradise-flycatcher
(Photo: Dr Jairamchander Pingle)

Rose-ringed Parakeet
(Photo: Dr Jairamchander Pingle)

The tree shade that runs throughout the walk path is a blessing and so are the shuttles which give your legs the much needed rest if required. The Bitterns who usually present themselves, by and large gave us a miss this time around – although Humayun did see the Yellow Bittern – but the Herons were out in full force, as also many other birds.

Indian Thick-knee (Photo: Pawan Talkad)

A sleepy Spotted Owlet (Photo: Pawan Talkad)

Black-rumped Flameback
(Photo: Wg Cdr Yella Prakash Rao)

The fabulous lensmen members took some amazing pictures that found their way into more than a couple of newspapers the next morning.

Black Kite (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Around sixty species were spotted, notable amongst which were the gorgeous Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters, Taiga Flycatcher and Crow-billed Drongo.

Chestnut-headed Bee-eater (Photo: Abhishek Shroti)

Taiga Flycatcher (Photo: Abhishek Shroti)

NZP always throws up a rich birding experience and it has been one of the most favourite birding destinations of the Deccan Birders members for a long time. May it always remain so!

Common Hoopoe pair (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Rufous Treepie pair (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

White-breasted Waterhen (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Red-wattled Lapwing (Photo: Pawan Talkad)

A list of birds seen by the group during the trip is given below:

Sl. No.	Common Name	Scientific Name	Sl. No.	Common Name	Scientific Name
1	Indian Spot-billed Duck	*Anas poecilorhyncha*	26	Eurasian Hoopoe	*Upupa epops*
2	Indian Peafowl	*Pavo cristatus*	27	White-throated Kingfisher	*Halcyon smyrnensis*
3	Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia*	28	Chestnut-headed Bee-eater	*Merops leschenaulti*
4	Spotted Dove	*Streptopelia chinensis*	29	Coppersmith Barbet	*Psilopogon haemacephalus*
5	Laughing Dove	*Streptopelia senegalensis*	30	Rose-ringed Parakeet	*Psittacula krameri*
6	Greater Coucal	*Centropus sinensis*	31	Indian Golden Oriole	*Oriolus kundoo*
7	Asian Koel	*Eudynamys scolopaceus*	32	Black Drongo	*Dicrurus macrocercus*
8	Grey-bellied Cuckoo	*Cacomantis passerinus*	33	Ashy Drongo	*Dicrurus leucophaeus*
9	Common Hawk Cuckoo	*Hierococcyx varius*	34	Crow-billed Drongo	*Dicrurus annectens*
10	Grey-headed Swamphen	*Porphyrio poliocephalus*	35	Rufous Treepie	*Dendrocitta vagabunda*
11	White-breasted Waterhen	*Amaurornis phoenicurus*	36	House Crow	*Corvus splendens*
12	Red-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus indicus*	37	Common Tailorbird	*Orthotomus sutorius*
13	Green Sandpiper	*Tringa ochropus*	38	Ashy Prinia	*Prinia socialis*
14	Painted Stork	*Mycteria leucocephala*	39	Plain Prinia	*Prinia inornata*
15	Grey Heron	*Ardea cinerea*	40	Blyth's Reed Warbler	*Acrocephalus dumetorum*
16	Purple Heron	*Ardea purpurea*	41	Red-vented Bulbul	*Pycnonotus cafer*
17	Great Egret	*Ardea alba*	42	Large Grey Babbler	*Turdoides malcolmi*
18	Indian Pond Heron	*Ardeola grayii*	43	Yellow-billed Babbler	*Turdoides affinis*
19	Black-crowned Night Heron	*Nycticorax nycticorax*	44	Rosy Starling	*Pastor roseus*
20	Black-headed Ibis	*Threskiornis melanocephalus*	45	Asian Pied Starling	*Gracupica contra*
21	Red-naped Ibis	*Pseudibis papillosa*	46	Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*
22	Black-winged Kite	*Elanus caeruleus*	47	Indian Robin	*Copsychus fulicatus*
23	Shikra	*Accipiter badius*	48	Oriental Magpie Robin	*Copsychus saularis*
24	Black Kite	*Milvus migrans*	49	Tickell's Blue Flycatcher	*Cyornis tickelliae*
25	Spotted Owlet	*Athene brama*	50	Taiga Flycatcher	*Ficedula albicilla*

Sl. No.	Common Name	Scientific Name	Sl. No.	Common Name	Scientific Name
51	Purple-rumped Sunbird	*Leptocoma zeylonica*	61	Indian Grey Hornbill	*Ocyceros birostris*
52	Purple Sunbird	*Cinnyris asiaticus*	62	Chestnut-tailed Starling	*Sturnia malabarica*
53	Indian Silverbill	*Euodice malabarica*	63	Barn Swallow	*Hirundo rustica*
54	Scaly-breasted Munia	*Lonchura punctulata*	64	Asian Palm Swift	*Cypsiurus balasiensis*
55	White-browed Wagtail	*Motacilla maderaspatensis*	65	Bronze-winged Jacana	*Metopidius indicus*
56	Grey Wagtail	*Motacilla cinerea*	66	Little Egret	*Egretta garzetta*
57	Indian Thick-knee	*Burhinus indicus*	67	Yellow Bittern	*Ixobrychus sinensis*
58	Cattle Egret	*Bubulcus ibis*	68	Pale-billed Flowerpecker	*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*
59	Grey Francolin	*Francolinus pondicerianus*	69	Black-rumped Flameback	*Dinopium benghalense*
60	Common Kingfisher	*Alcedo atthis*			

Some other photographs taken during the trip:

Black-crowned Night Heron (Photo: Abhishek Shroti)

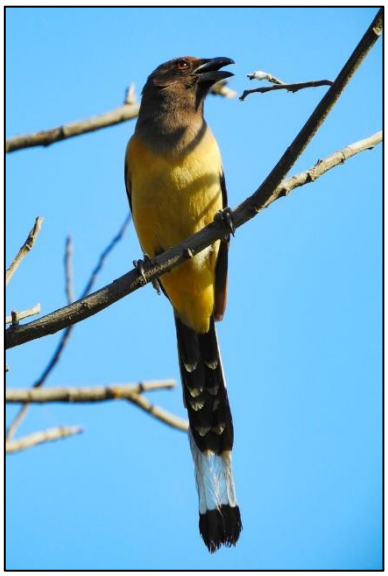
Spot-billed Pelican (Photo: Dr Jairamchander Pingle)

Yellow-billed Babbler (Photo: Mohd Adnan Uddin)

White-browed Wagtail (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Oriental Magpie Robin female (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Indian Golden Oriole female (Photo: Abhishek Shroti)



Rufous Treepie
(Photo: Mohd Adnan Uddin)

Common Hawk Cuckoo
(Photo: Pawan Talkad)

Coppersmith Barbet
(Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Common Kingfisher
(Photo: Dr Jairamchander Pingle)

Great White Pelican
(Photo: Dr Jairamchander Pingle)

A scene at the Nehru Zoo
(Photo: Bharadwaj Korni)

Grey Heron
(Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Indian Grey Hornbill
(Photo: Dr Jairamchander Pingle)

Greater Flamingo
(Photo: Dr Jairamchander Pingle)

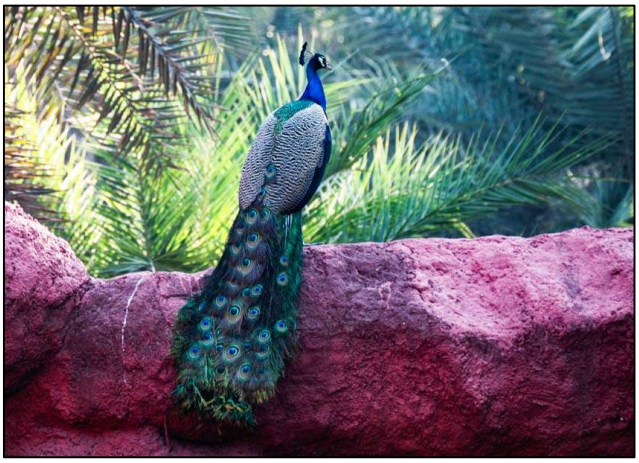
(Photo: Dr Jairamchander Pingle)

(Photo: Dr Geethanjali Ramachandra)

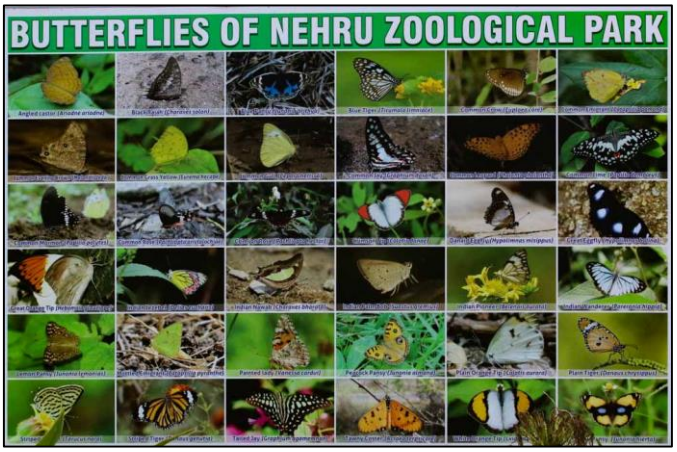
The group in action

Rose-ringed Parakeet (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Grey Wagtail (Photo: Pawan Talkad)



Indian Peafowl male (Photo: Dr Jairamchander Pingle)

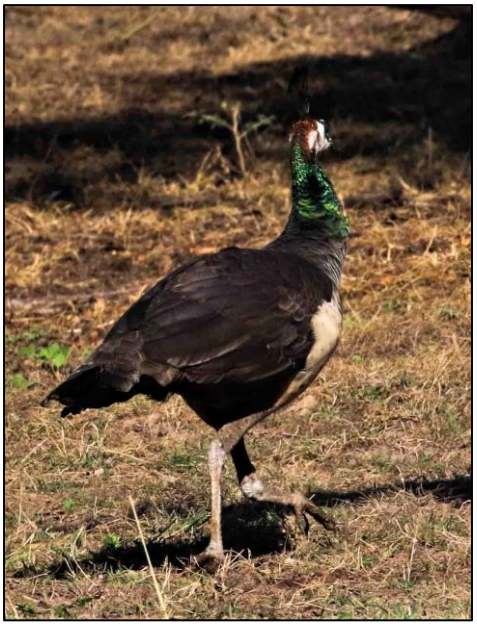


Butterfly poster at the Nehru Zoo (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

White-breasted Kingfisher (Photo: Pawan Talkad)

Black Kite (Photo: Abhishek Shroti)

Grey-headed Swamphen
(Photo: Dr Jairamchander Pingle)



Indian Peafowl female
(Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Black-crowned Night Heron
(Photo: Mohd Adnan Uddin)

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Trip Report: Sri Venkateswara National Park, Tirupati, February 2021

Text and Photos: Sita Susarla

A view at Mamandur

The beautiful Seshachalam Hills of the Eastern Ghats in Tirupati are studded with a variety of very old trees, beautiful Flora and equally beautiful Fauna, springs, streams and waterfalls. It was declared as a Biosphere Reserve in the year 2010. The Sri Venkateswara National Park is housed in the Seshachalam Biosphere, and is a birding hotspot with nearly 175 bird species. Globally threatened Yellow-throated Bulbuls, and some Himalayan and Western Ghats birds like Grey-fronted Green Pigeons are seen here.

We had the good fortune to visit the park in the middle of February 2021. Guided by a couple of birders from Tirupati, we spent a day each at Mamandur Forest and Talakona, and also visited Kalyani Dam.

The Mamandur Forest is situated between Chittoor and Cuddapah districts and forms the foothills of Seshachalam Hills. The area receives water from Thumbura Thirtham of Tirumala Forest. The vegetation here is mainly of dry deciduous type, and a few evergreen plants are also seen though to a lesser extent.

It was a cloudy morning when we entered the forest and we could hear faint chirps from here and there. We were mainly hoping to see the White-rumped Shama, Western Crowned Warbler and Grey-fronted Green Pigeon.

Black Shaheen

Just as we entered, we sighted a Black Shaheen perched on a pylon, and some Scimitar Babblers and Paradise-flycatchers were calling from the nearby bamboo bushes.

The rufous morph Paradise-flycatchers were everywhere in this forest. A little further on, a flock of Puff-throated Babblers crossed our path and right there, perched on the lower branches of a tree, was the Shama!

White-rumped Shama

It was still dark inside the forest and the Shama, being crepuscular in nature, was quite active. We waited for about quarter of an hour watching it when another pair of Shamas appeared, foraging in the open. By now the clouds had cleared out a little and as the first rays of the Sun streamed through the thick canopy of leaves, the Shamas disappeared into the thickets.

As we moved on, the bird activity started increasing, and we saw the Orange-headed Thrush, Common Woodshrike, Brown-breasted Flycatcher and Ashy Drongo, amidst the calls of White-browed Bulbuls.

Brown-breasted Flycatcher

Deeper in the forest we came across a very scenic and enchanting stream adorned with forest flowers and filled with the songs of many a bird. There were the Golden-fronted Leafbirds, Black-naped and Black-hooded Orioles, Common Kingfisher, Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, Large Cuckooshrike, White-browed Bulbul, White-spotted Fantail, Common Iora and Jungle Babbler.

Black-naped Oriole

The Grey-fronted Green Pigeon and Western Crowned Warbler however could not be sighted. Instead we saw a Bamboo Bush Brown butterfly on our way back and this was a lifer for us.

Bamboo Bush Brown

On the next day we were at Talakona, in the Sri Venkateswara National Park. It was a well-wooded forest, unlike Mamandur. At the entrance of the Park we sighted many Crested Treeswifts. The highlight here, however, was the Brown-cheeked Fulvetta, with its calls reverberating across the forest. There were also a large number of Common Woodshrikes, Common Ioras, White-bellied Drongos, about five Green Imperial Pigeons, some White-browed and Yellow-browed Bulbuls, a couple of Yellow-throated Bulbuls and the Verditer Flycatcher. We also witnessed a large number of Common Crow and Blue Tiger butterflies, probably in migration. It was an amazing sight. The last time we had seen such a butterfly migration was that of Blue Tigers, Common Crows and Striped Tigers at Peechy Dam, in Kerala.

From Talakona we set off to Kalyani Dam, constructed on river Swarnamukhi. En route, we stopped at a few places to gaze at the beautiful hills of Seshachalam. At one of the view-points we saw a Black Eagle with a prey in its claws. The local birders pointed out that the Black Eagle was a common sight at Tirupati.

By now it was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon and we quickly drove to the Dam site. This was a crowded place but there was a small patch of birding ground nearby. Surprisingly, it had an unbelievable number of birds besides the perfect habitat for the Brown-breasted Flycatcher. There were a couple of Blue-faced Malkohas, many Black-hooded Orioles, and some Common Woodshrikes, White-browed Bulbuls and Common Ioras. It was a real feast for the eyes.

Black-hooded Oriole

With three lifers and a total count of nearly 70 species of birds we had a rejuvenating birding experience in all. A detailed list is given below:

Sl. No.	Species Name	Scientific Name	Mamandur	Talakona	Kalyani Dam
1	Ashy Drongo	*Dicrurus leucophaeus*	Y		
2	Ashy Woodswallow	*Artamus fuscus*	Y	Y	
3	Asian Koel	*Eudynamys scolopaceus*	Y		
4	Barn Swallow	*Hirundo rustica*	Y		
5	Black Drongo	*Dicrurus macrocercus*	Y		Y
6	Black Eagle	*Ictinaetus malayensis*		Y	
7	Black Kite	*Milvus migrans*		Y	
8	Black Shaheen	*Falco (peregrinus) peregrinator*	Y		
9	Black-hooded Oriole	*Oriolus xanthornus*	Y		Y
10	Black-naped Monarch	*Hypothymis azurea*	Y		
11	Black-naped Oriole	*Oriolus chinensis*	Y		
12	Blue-faced Malkoha	*Phaenicophaeus viridirostris*			Y
13	Blue-tailed Bee-eater	*Merops philippinus*	Y		
14	Blyth's Reed Warbler	*Acrocephalus dumetorum*	Y	Y	
15	Brown Shrike	*Lanius cristatus*	Y		
16	Brown-breasted Flycatcher	*Muscicapa muttui*	Y		Y
17	Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker	*Dendrocopos nanus*	Y	Y	
18	Brown-cheeked Fulvetta	*Alcippe poioicephala*		Y	
19	Brown-headed Barbet	*Megalaima zeylanica*	Y	Y	Y
20	Common Hawk Cuckoo	*Hierococcyx varius*		Y	Y

Sl. No.	Species Name	Scientific Name	Mamandur	Talakona	Kalyani Dam
21	Common Iora	*Aegithina tiphia*	Y	Y	Y
22	Common Kingfisher	*Alcedo atthis*	Y		
23	Common Tailorbird	*Orthotomus sutorius*	Y	Y	Y
24	Common Woodshrike	*Tephrodornis pondicerianus*	Y	Y	Y
25	Coppersmith Barbet	*Psilopogon haemacephalus*	Y	Y	Y
26	Crested Treeswift	*Hemiprocne coronata*		Y	
27	Golden-fronted Leafbird	*Chloropsis aurifrons*	Y		
28	Green Bee-eater	*Merops orientalis*	Y	Y	Y
29	Green Imperial Pigeon	*Ducula aenea*		Y	
30	Greenish Warbler	*Seicercus trochiloides*		Y	Y
31	Grey Francolin	*Francolinus pondicerianus*	Y		
32	Grey Junglefowl	*Gallus sonneratii*	Y		
33	Grey Wagtail	*Motacilla cinerea*	Y		
34	Grey-breasted Prinia	*Prinia hodgsonii*	Y		
35	House Crow	*Corvus splendens*	Y	Y	Y
36	Indian Grey Hornbill	*Ocyceros birostris*	Y		
37	Indian Paradise-flycatcher	*Terpsiphone paradisi*	Y		Y
38	Indian Robin	*Saxicoloides fulicatus*	Y	Y	Y
39	Indian Scimitar Babbler	*Pomatorhinus horsfieldii*	Y		
40	Indian White-eye	*Zosterops palpebrosus*		Y	
41	Jungle Babbler	*Turdoides striata*	Y		
42	Large Cuckooshrike	*Coracina macei*	Y		
43	Laughing Dove	*Streptopelia senegalensis*		Y	
44	Lesser Whitethroat	*Curruca curruca*		Y	Y
45	Orange-headed Thrush	*Zoothera citrina*	Y		Y
46	Oriental Magpie Robin	*Copsychus saularis*	Y	Y	Y
47	Pale-billed Flowerpecker	*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*	Y	Y	Y
48	Puff-throated Babbler	*Pellorneum ruficeps*	Y		
49	Purple Sunbird	*Cinnyris asiaticus*	Y	Y	Y
50	Purple-rumped Sunbird	*Leptocoma zeylonica*	Y	Y	Y
51	Red-vented Bulbul	*Pycnonotus cafer*	Y	Y	Y
52	Red-whiskered Bulbul	*Pycnonotus jocosus*	Y		
53	Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia*		Y	
54	Rufous Treepie	*Dendrocitta vagabunda*			Y
55	Shikra	*Accipiter badius*	Y		
56	Small Minivet	*Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*	Y	Y	Y
57	Southern Coucal	*Centropus sinensis*	Y		
58	Spotted Dove	*Streptopelia chinensis*		Y	
59	Tickell's Blue Flycatcher	*Cyornis tickelliae*	Y	Y	Y
60	Verditer Flycatcher	*Eumyias thalassinus*		Y	
61	White-bellied Drongo	*Dicrurus caerulescens*		Y	
62	White-browed Bulbul	*Pycnonotus luteolus*	Y	Y	Y
63	White-rumped Shama	*Copsychus malabaricus*	Y		
64	White-spotted Fantail	*Rhipidura (albicollis) albogularis*	Y		
65	White-throated Kingfisher	*Halcyon smyrnensis*	Y		
66	Yellow-billed Babbler	*Turdoides affinis*		Y	Y
67	Yellow-browed Bulbul	*Acritillas indica*		Y	
68	Yellow-throated Bulbul	*Pycnonotus xantholaemus*		Y	

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Gadwall (*Mareca strepera*)

Gadwall male (L) and female (R) (Gajoldoba, West Bengal, January 25-26, 2021)

Order: Anseriformes
Family: Anatidae
Genus: *Mareca (formerly Anas)*
Species: *M. strepera*
Size: 39-42 cm

Description & distribution: The Gadwall is a fairly common dabbling duck from the family Anatidae. Genetically it is a sister species of the Falcated Duck (*Mareca falcata*), and closely related to the Eurasian Wigeon (*Mareca penelope*), which may be the reason why it is usually found in their company. The Gadwall breeds in northern Europe and across all of the Palearctic region (i.e. across all of Eurasia north of the foothills of the Himalayas, and North Africa), as well as central North America. It is not a very long-distance migrant – it travels mainly to the areas north of the tropics, including coastal Alaska, southern Canada and central America, and parts of southern and central Europe and Asia – particularly in Pakistan and northern India, and a little less commonly in peninsular or southern India. It is a vagrant in Sri Lanka.

The Gadwall is a medium-sized dabbling duck with very nondescript plumage, leading to it being often misidentified in the field. The female and the non-breeding male are very similar and look like a dull version of the female Mallard. The male, though, is greyer on the upperparts than the browner female, and has less orange in the bill. The dark orange-edged bill and smaller size help differentiate the female from the female Mallard.

The breeding male is mainly grey with a very delicate vermiculate pattern over the scapulars and upperparts, a whitish belly, black upper and lower coverts, light chestnut wings, and a marked white speculum (present also in females) that is more easily visible in flight. The legs are bright yellowish orange. Juvenile birds are very much like the female.

Habitat & behaviour: The Gadwall is usually seen in pairs or small groups. In breeding season, it prefers marshes, ponds, and small lakes near grasslands in both fresh and brackish water. It generally avoids wetlands near woodlands or thick vegetation, and is more abundant in *jheels* and marshes near grassy areas, rather than open or deep marshes. In the non-breeding (winter) season, it prefers brackish water marshes with a good amount of leafy aquatic vegetation. Populations have often been noted to demonstrate wintering site fidelity, returning to the same marshes, ponds or water treatment plants.

It usually forages for plant food by picking up items from the surface or by dabbling with head submerged. It may occasionally up-end or dive for food, but would hardly ever forage on land. Its main diet consists of aquatic plants, and it tends to eat more of the stems and leaves, and less of the seeds. It may also eat small quantities of mollusks, crustaceans, aquatic insects and small fish. The usual call of the male is a short, deep, reedy *burp*, given in steady succession or 2-5 at a time in flight; it also gives high-pitched whistles. The female utters a *quack* or a *gag-gag-gag*. The Gadwall is generally a quiet bird, especially in its non-breeding grounds. It moults out of its breeding plumage after successful mating, during which period it is flightless and vulnerable to predation.

Nesting: The Gadwall is generally monogamous – though extra-pair copulations have occasionally been reported – and even renews pair bonds in subsequent years. It breeds generally between May and late July in its breeding grounds. The male performs two elaborate courtship displays – the Head-Up-Tail-Up (where the male throws the head back and jerks the body with tail raised, mainly to display the white speculum) and the Grunt-Whistle (where the male rears out of the water and slowly sinks back while emitting a loud whistle). The nest is built on dry land near water, surrounded by dense weeds or grass. It is built by the female while the male stands guard, and is made of grasses and weeds in a shallow depression and lined with down. The usual clutch consists of 8-11 white eggs, though this number can sometimes go to 5-13. If the nest is predated, the Gadwall may lay another clutch in the same season.

Local name: The Gadwall is known as *'Myla', 'Buari'* or *'Beykhur'* in Hindi, *'Yella repalla batu'* in Telugu, *'Gaidwal'* in Punjabi, *'Gadwal eranda'* in Malayalam, *'Luhar'* in Gujarati and *'Malin hansak'* in Sanskrit.

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Bird Humour

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(Received on WhatsApp, September 12, 2020)

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